



## Peacekeeping History from Below

*The use of oral history and memories*

Jørgensen, Martin Ottovay

*Publication date:*  
2012

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Jørgensen, M. O. (2012). *Peacekeeping History from Below: The use of oral history and memories*. (pp. 1-12).

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [vbn@aub.aau.dk](mailto:vbn@aub.aau.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

My project deals with the UN peacekeeping operations in the Gaza Strip and Cyprus and seeks to analyse how the local connects with the global in a period defined by the formal end of imperialism and the Cold War; in other words how the local populations and the encounters with the UN soldiers are connected to international politics and global processes. Oral history will be used along with archival records to get as many perspectives as possible. As the project is transnational in scope it reflects the shifting of oral history itself, having moved from Western Europe and North America (+ Australia and New Zealand) to the rest of the world in different waves.<sup>1</sup>

The first part of the paper addresses the perceived struggle between professional or academic history and memory. The second part is oriented towards how I see the interviews in the project as well as some reflections on the different groups I will come into contact with and hopefully be able to interview and on how to go about these. The third and last part is an attempt to reflect on my own background and how that have already influenced some interviews and might influence others.

### **History and Memory: the use of archives and oral history interviews**

The explosion of memory studies across several disciplines following Pierre Nora's work on French memories and the broader rediscovery of the work of Halbwachs has caused some worry amongst historians about caving in to the wave of memory or the old song on issues of reliability with oral history interviews as one the most common reservations. However, as expressed by many oral historians this platform of criticism offers little reflection on archival practices most common amongst historians. On the other hand, historians such as Haitian Michel-Rolph Trouillot has indeed spoken not only in favour of including the public in History-making, but also argued the archive also only provide part of the pieces to understand the past and indeed that the larger part of narratives of the past are either lost or retained only outside of the official archive and that some experiences are never recorded.<sup>2</sup> Amongst especially critically and post-colonially minded archival researchers there is now a growing sense of agreement that "(...) *archives are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed.*"<sup>3</sup> As has been pointed out by postcolonial minded archivist Jeanette Bastian, imperial archives were indeed part of the imperial project as a performative institution.<sup>4</sup> Over the past decade some of the critically and post-colonially minded archivists

---

1 Thomson, Alistair: "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History", the Oral History Review no. 1, 2006, pp. 66-67

2 Trouillot, Michel-Rolph: "Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History", Beacon, 1995, pp. xx-yy

3 Cook, T. and J. Schwartz: "Archives, Records and Power: The Making of Modern Memory", Archival Science no. 3-4, 2002, p. 1

4 Bastian, J.: "Reading Colonial Records Through an Archival Lens: The Provenance of Place, Space and Creation", Archival Science no. 1, 2002, pp. 267-284

have not surprisingly therefore also begun promoting privileging other sources and histories over those the archives can provide.<sup>5</sup>

The archives of EIMAC, UNEF, UNFICYP and UNHCR<sup>6</sup> are in this sense expressions and functions of themselves and the current paradigm of global governance that the UN with all its agencies is a constitutive part of. In one sense the records hold a deliberating capacity due to the presence of material that holds stories otherwise not common to the mainstream narratives of peacekeeping in the troop contributing countries. On the other hand the records have their limitations there is no way of knowing what has been reported and what has not. UNEF Reports involving Scandinavian troops seem to be more reoccurring than those of Latin American troops perhaps reflecting a somewhat weaker 'Weberian' mentality on incident reporting.<sup>7</sup> Translation is another issue. In one case a hand grenade thrown by an Israeli kibbutzim into a Palestinian home near the ADL was translated into merely having made 'noise' when it exploded and almost killed a young Palestinian doing his homework.<sup>8</sup> In the UNHCR's records on Cyprus the material only begins a decade after the peacekeeping operation was established just as there is little direct trace of the very people that became refugees aside statistics as most records concern themselves with high politics or the administrative and operational procedures of the UNHCR on Cyprus. The written material therefore also hold a marginalising capacity not only in relation to which stories can be found, but also structurally from being part of the dominant European/north American bureaucratic global governance paradigm related to its imperial predecessors along with cartography and surveying. Oral history interviews are hence necessary to provide a balance to the records as well as add nuances to these.

Academic history, as practiced in the history departments at universities, constitute only one way of relating to the past. We need to acknowledge this, also in our work. Historian of Africa and slavery Trevor Getz has argued in favour of and practices subjecting history.<sup>9</sup> Concretely he has opened up his process of History-making to the public by way of an online manuscript with options of commenting as it progresses. Oral history interviews might be able to offer something of similar.

Peacekeeping history whether on UNEF, UNFICYP or beyond and in my view also history as a discipline cannot hence afford to ignore memories and oral history testimonies from 'within' and especially 'below'. The performance of academic history as a state-oriented activity and the document fetish of historians, still dominant to this day, have left huge gaps in our understanding

---

5 Alexander, B: "Excluding Archival Silences: Oral History and Historical Absence", Archival Science no. 1, 2006, pp. 1-11

6 The Egyptian-Israeli Armistice Commission, the United Nations Emergency Force, the United Nations peace-keeping Force in Cyprus and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

7 My interview with an UN observer revealed that at least in the winter from 1958 to spring 1959 only the Scandinavian units were conducting night operations. This might explain at least some of the differences in the number of reports from the different contingents.

8 Investigation report from UNMO to Chairman, Egyptian-Israeli Mixed Armistice Commission, 27 June 1957, in file Complaints and Investigations April 1957 to June 1957, in series Political Affairs - EIMAC - Area Files - Gaza Strip -, EIMAC Funds, S-0375, United Nations Archives

9 [Subjecting History: Building a Relationship Between History and its Alternatives. \(Trevor R. Getz\)](#) (accessed on 25/10/2012)

of peacekeeping operations as well the current paradigm of global governance as we have not yet overcome the dominant perspectives nor the silences of the archives. There is therefore a need to utilise memory from 'below' to counter official commemoration or myth. Accordingly, I see memories and other ways of relating to time and experiences as complementary rather than contradictory; it is not a question of academic history *or* memory, but academic history *and* memory and hence acknowledging that they are different ways of relating to and making sense of time, space and experiences. This, in turn, is also an acknowledgment of academic discourses indeed do carry manifestations of performativity rather than being neutral descriptions although some historians still claim this to be the case.

## **The interviews**

The interviews will ideally be an integral element of the project which I consider not only mine, but also belonging to those people whose voices have not been heard hitherto in relation to these UN military operations. I plan, and hope for, some 20-25 oral history interviews of local inhabitants, refugees, settlers and UN troops from both 'mission areas'. If they will come to constitute one of several sets of sources or make up the most important group will depend of who I will be able to interview and what I can make from the interviews once obtained. My hope is at least on the one hand to supplement the archival records with the interviews and the themes in these and on the other to be able to move beyond the very same.

At the general level I agree with Lynn Abrams that interviews are best seen as co-creative and dynamic processes that will lead to a co-created material (and in my case that will become part of a larger material). That leads to the important realisation that interviews are not just about mining the interviews information, but a careful analysis of the joint enterprise of bringing about the sources relying on memory. Memories are not an unproblematic and simple form of recalling of the past, but an active as well as complex process of creation of meaning by remembering images, stories and experiences, ordering them and placing them within a narrative and then finally sharing them in a social context.<sup>10</sup> Part of the task of when interpreting the interviews, the transcriptions and tapes alike, will then be to reflect on which memory communities the interviewees see themselves as belonging to and how they relate to their the past that relates to the peacekeeping operation generally and specifically in the interview. When speaking with Greek or Turk Cypriots, Armenian, Bedouin, Palestinians, Israelis or Egyptians this will become obvious.

In relation to the operation in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, the people in the refugee camps of Rafah, Khan Yunis and Jabaliya, in citizens of the strip near Beit Lahun, Beit Lahia and the ADL, Bedouin moving from Egypt to the Negev desert through the Sinai and the strip, Egyptians and Israelis residing near the ADL all provide a pool of potentially very useful interviewees. On Cyprus people from both ethnic groups that used to live on either side of the buffer zone in ethnically mixed areas and now live elsewhere, in the areas or close to the areas where the interviewed soldiers were deployed or in the areas close to the British military bases will all be of interest. Who I will get to interview, obviously depends on whom I can get access to and permission from, not only those of interest to me. Once I have relocated to Ghent I will turn my attention to organisation of the visit to Cyprus. As of now I plan to go there if possible

---

<sup>10</sup> Abrams, Lynn: "Oral History Theory", Routledge, 2010, p. 6-11. I will rely on semantic (factual memory), episodic memory (recollection of events) and flash bulb memory (within episodic memory with visual quality), p. 83

late July and for up to two months. If the political situation allows it I plan to go there in late 2013.

Amongst the groups of different local populations are people that have become refugees. They will be important to seek to get access to not only as ‘they’ in the Gaza Strip constitute by far the larger part of the population or in Cyprus make up a significant part of the population, but also as they represent and can provide – as Spivak argues in favour of, alternative perspectives on encounters with the UN troops, the general workings of the UN and the impact on the area of not only the conflict, but also becoming a ‘mission area’. For those people having become refugees who agree to take part in the interviews I think it will be useful to do life story interviews rather than single issue interviews as a means to promote a sense of agency as their situations, while not removing all space for agency, will most probably feel as if having done so and also allow for a difficult connection in time to be made. If necessary, suitable or helpful group interviews might also be useful. Beverly Butler speaks of a ‘remembered presence’ of their histories, something I therefore find important to include and let run as the main thread in the interview weaving my questions around their narrative.<sup>11</sup> Common reflections of the broader field of refugees studies also focus on the need to obtain permission in a way that not only formally secures the interviewees’ rights to withdraw their content at any time and provide means to complain and last but not most certainly not the least be sensitive to the issue of trauma with being forced off ones’ land or losing friends or relatives.<sup>12</sup> It will accordingly be important to take into account how the various potential interviewees have been, are and will be in different situations prior to, during and after the interviews and accordingly may have irrevocable pasts that needs to be carefully observed through a continuous process of informed consent along with sensitive and differentiated questions. The different interpreters will most probably be aware of the dynamics and perhaps even themselves be the gatekeepers to some of the potential interviewees.

While accepting not just their answers but their narrative as an integral part of the interview and having them trust me or feel secure with me as an interviewer along with the interpreter is important, there is also question of providing external security or at least not threaten existing measures as both Cyprus and the Gaza Strip must be acknowledged to be highly politicised places.<sup>13</sup> This requires some broader conceptualisations and reflections on refugee camp dynamics and interview people in refugee camps<sup>14</sup> as well as particular knowledge of Cyprus and the Gaza Strip to be remedied with readings of social and historical anthropology, interview

---

11 Butler, B.: “‘Othering’ the Archive – from exile to inclusion and heritage dignity: the case of Palestinian memory”, *Archival Science* no. 1-2, 2009, pp. 57-69

12 Hugman, Richard, Bartoolomei, Linda, and Pittway, Eileen: “Human Agency and the Meaning of Informed Consent: Reflections on Research with Refugees”, *Journal of Refugee Studies* no. 4, 2011, pp. 655-671 and Klempner, Mark: *Navigating Life Reviews Interviews with Survivors of Trauma*, in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson: “The Oral History Reader”, Routledge, 2008, pp. 198-210

13 Jesse, Erin: “The Limits of Oral History: Ethics and Methodology Amid Highly Politicized Research Settings”, *The Oral History Review* no. 2 2011, pp. 287-307

14 As for instance provided by Turner, Simon: “Negotiating Authority between UNHCR and ‘The People’”, *Development and Change* no. 4, 2009, pp. 759–778 or Giorgio Agamben “*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*”, Stanford University Press, 1998

based refugee research, research of the history of the places to get the places under my skin so to speak.<sup>15</sup>

In both the Gaza Strip and Cyprus I will attempt to follow a certain periodization in my questions so as to allow the interviewees to build on previous answers. The questions will most probably be rather open-ended and work between the common structures of “*what happened, how they felt about it, how they recall it and what wider public memory they draw upon*”.<sup>16</sup> The topics that are relevant to cover are:

#### UNEF:

---

-1948:

- everyday imperial life and the imperial political situation prior to 1948 while Palestine was informally a British colony
- the ideas, politics and presence of the British and the Jewish migrants
- matters related to identity, memories and reflections on places
- the main characters internationally and in the strip for the interviewees’ general historical orientation

1948-1956:

- everyday life and the inter-communal violence in the early 1950’s
- matters related to identity, memories and reflections on places
- everyday life and the joint invasion of 1956

1956-1967:

- everyday life and the experiences with the UN from 1956 onwards
- everyday life from 1956 to 1967
- matters related to identity, memories and reflections on places
- everyday life from 1967 onwards (to allow them to narrate their stories although the operations stopped in 1967)
- reflections on the interview and how it feels, my role

#### UNFICYP:

---

- 1964:

- everyday imperial life and the imperial political situation prior to 1960 while Cyprus was formally a British colony
- the roots of the conflict
- the ideas, politics and presence promoted by Turkey and Greece
- matters related to identity, memories and reflections on places
- the main characters internationally and on the island for the interviewees’ general historical orientation
- everyday life and the inter-communal violence in the early 1960’s

1964-1974:

---

15 Examples of these could be for instance: Al-Barghouti, Mureed: “Songs for a Country No Longer known”, *Journal of Palestine Studies* no. 2 1998, pp. 59-67, Bryant, Rebecca: *Partitions of Memory: Wounds and Witnessing in Cyprus*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* no. 2 2012, pp. 332-360, Khader, Hassan: “Confessions of a Palestinian Returnee”, *Journal of Palestine Studies* no. 1 1997, pp. 85-95, *Journal of Palestine Studies: “Refugee Interviews”*, *Journal of Palestine Studies* no. 1 1988, pp. 158-171, Loizos, Peter: “The Heart grown Bitter – A Chronicle of Cypriot War Refugees”, Cambridge University Press, 1981, Masalha, N.: “The Palestine Nakba. Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern and Reclaiming Memory”, Zed Books, 2012 and Papadakis, Yiannis, Nicos Peristianis and Gisele Welz (eds.): “Divided Cyprus – Modernity, History and an Island in Conflict”, Indiana University Press, 2006

and Sa’di, A.: “Remembering Al-Nakba in a Time of Amnesia”, *Interventions* no. 3 2008, pp. 381-399

16 op cit, p. 108

- everyday life and the experiences with the UN from 1964 onwards
- everyday life from 1964 to 1974
- matters related to identity, memories and reflections on places

1974 -:

- everyday life and the Turkish invasion of 1974
- everyday life and the experiences with the UN from 1964 onwards
- everyday life from 1974 onwards
- matters related to identity, memories and reflections on places
- reflections on the interview and how it feels, my role

As for the military interviewees, connecting military and peacekeeping history with oral history at the theoretical level is rather unproblematic as military oral history generally has a long tradition both before and during the reign of the modern historical regime. The world wars have provided ample impetus in several countries to set up large scale oral history programmes that have led to thousands of interviews with veterans. Considering the strong traditions of public history in the US, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand and Australia, it is not surprising that most interviewed veterans from the world Wars mostly come from these countries.<sup>17</sup> Some projects were state initiated; others were established by university historians with chairs in military history such as the Military Oral History Collection at the University of Victoria that now holds more than 200 interviews from the 1970's. At this university courses are also offered to students so as to promote the use of oral history interviews as an integral part of military history.<sup>18</sup> At the general level the ongoing interest in oral history as this integral part of military history has led to a growing literature on the issues related to interviewing soldiers with regard to traumas and long silences, how to speak of death and more specifically of the deaths of people with whom they shared particularly intimate moments.<sup>19</sup> In the words of Coffmann; "Oral history goes naturally with military history"<sup>20</sup> and "There is, indeed, much to be learned from those who were there" when it comes to dimensions such as personalities, the probable tension between civilian and military components as well as intricate workings of the operational bureaucracy.<sup>21</sup> Oral history interviews and hence the use of memory have in fact also been used in studies of peacekeeping operations<sup>22</sup>, yet the questions on voice raised by the postcolonial Indian historian Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak<sup>23</sup> necessarily begs to ask questions of the voices uttered and heard versus those not uttered and not heard and hence the ability and authority to speak. The

17 Coffman, Edward M.; "Talking about War: Reflections on Doing Oral History and Military History", *Journal of American History* no. 3, 2000, p. 588

18 <http://library.uvic.ca/spcoll/military/miloral.html> (accessed on 26/11/2012)

19 See for instance Parr, Alison: "Breaking the Silence: Traumatized War Veterans and Oral History", *Oral History Society* no. 1, 2007, pp. 61-70 and Thomson, Alistair: "ANZAC

20 Coffman, 2000, p. 582

21 Op. cit., p. 591

22 Butler, B.: "MR. UNIFIL" Reflects on a Quarter Century of Peacekeeping in South Lebanon", *Journal of Palestine Studies* no. 3 2007, pp. 50-77, . The UN oral history project and Hansen, Pernille Østergaard: "Fjernt fra Danmark – En praktisk-afrikanistisk analyse af danske FN-udsendtes fortælling om – og praktisering af – Congo I perioden 1960-1964", Københavns Universitet, 2010



perspectives presented and the few voiced heard have only represented the upper echelons of the UN itself or of the particular operation in Lebanon or a few UN soldiers without challenging neither their stories nor the paradigm they were agents for. Therefore more and different voices from troops and locals alike need to be heard from the ‘mission areas’. Problematic episodes from the ‘mission areas’, in some cases indicative of the larger picture, most often not part of the individual or collective memories or even national Barthesian myths, or at least not expressed in public, may hence begin to see the light of day.

As with the locals it is necessary to interview not only soldiers from one military contingent in terms of time or nationality just as it would be useful to interview across the ranks as the lower ranks most probably had the more frequent encounters with locals while the higher ranks most probably had a stronger sense of the ‘bigger picture’. The interviews will shift between life story interviews and single issues interviews and most probably in some cases be done online so as to get as many different perspectives; i.e. geographic, religious and political.

As for the question they will follow a periodization that reflects that they did not live in the ‘mission area’ as will the topics:

#### UNEF + UNFICYP

---

##### Prior to deployment

- their relationship with and perhaps promotion of the general and dominant discourses at play at home (economy, class, gender and family) and in the ‘mission area’ (‘peace’, ‘development’, the UN, the Cold War, ‘the other(s)’)
  - imaginations of everyday imperial life and the imperial political situation in Palestine and Cyprus
  - the main characters internationally and in the strip for the interviewees’ general historical orientation

##### During deployment

- their relationship with and perhaps promotion of the general and dominant discourses at play at home (economy, class, gender and family) and in the ‘mission area’ (‘peace’, ‘development’, the UN, the Cold War, ‘the other(s)’)
  - 
  - the larger picture (the UN operation as whole and its operational dynamics, refugee camps, ADL and general local area)
  - their own impressions and experiences within the contingents

##### After deployment

- their relationship with and perhaps promotion of the general and dominant discourses at play at home (economy, class, gender and family) and in the ‘mission area’ (peace, development, un, cold war, ‘the other’)
  - their own impressions and experiences within the contingents
  - the larger picture (the UN operation as whole and its operational dynamics, refugee camps, ADL and general local area)
  - reflections on the interview and how it feels, my role

In line with current practices in the field, I intend to use photographs to trigger responses to recall people, places and experiences working from a broader platform that takes interest and provide cues.<sup>24</sup>

---

23 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Nelson, Cary and Grossberg, Lawrence (ed.): “Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture”, MacMillan Education, 1988, p. 283 and 294

24 Abrams, 2010, pp. 78-81, 85-94 and 103



So far I have been able to interview 4 Danish UN soldiers; 2 officers (EIMAC, 1958-1959 + UNFICYP, 1990-1991), 1 doctor who served as medical staff (UNEF, 1966-1967) and 1 corporal (UNFICYP, 1971). As for the memories I have yet analyse them further, but I do recall some differences. The first interviewee had been to Cyprus in 1971 as a corporal instead of becoming a professional soldier with the special services as his wife was against this idea. We spoke in the setting of a private garden with his dog playing around for 2 hours. He was happy to share his stories in part because his own sons had not been in the army and he had not had the chance to talk about on his experiences with someone. That I was recording it, showing him photos and maps and finding it useful only made him more talkative it seems. It might be a question of a legacy perhaps? There is no doubt that he was proud of his service in general and his time on Cyprus. We got through my structure with some jumping forth and back, but with him feeling at ease at all times. His stories were marked by a negative memory towards some of his colleagues as their behaviour had left something to desire. Locals were minor actors in the stories in most cases. He was delighted to take part as he had someone to talk to. The doctor for whom it was an exciting time in the Gaza Strip in 1966-1967, it was nonetheless not that special to him and that interview also marked by a sense of him not really warming up seeing the point of the interview and its focus on 'the ground' and his experiences. The interview only just lasted 50 minutes and there was also to some extent a sense of not enjoying being asked when he was used to having the role of the chief of his work place. The interview felt long although it was the shortest, the outcome was perhaps poor at best and there was little in the air that indicated an interest in another interview. We were also at his workplace. He only really warmed up when the recorder was turned off and we turned to current events. The officer, who was in Cyprus in 1990, was mostly interested in setting up the context. As an officer he was clearly well versed in the bigger picture of the institutions and had the system more embedded in him. He shared more stories as the interview got along and he could use my maps and photos, but it was cut short to him needing to leave for a meeting after some 70 minutes. He might be up for another interview, where we could build on the first. But he was not comfortable as an active soldier to talk feeling he was compromising his loyalty to some extent. He also asked (and obviously has received) several times for anonymity in both writing and before and after the interview. The most recent interviewee and the most talkative along with the corporal, the first interviewee, was an officer that served in the Gaza Strip in 1958-1959. He is one of the more interesting as he has procured him reports himself while deployed, a material I have found in the UN archive. For him the interview was also a chance and probably one of the last, as he is 85 although physically and mentally fit, to share. He was happy to talk for 2 hours and not only of his experience in the Gaza Strip, but also of his tours to Lebanon and Kashmir, and was only interrupted by his wife's routine time for serving lunch. While the experience in the Gaza Strip was of the least interest to him, he was keen to talk again just as he provided me with some of his own reports, a material that I as mentioned for the most part also found in New York previously and therefore gave me some clues as to reporting practices. Since the interview he let me know that it was great and he was hoping to see me again not too far into the future. It would be great to do so once I have had the chance to go through his material and set up more particular questions.

In all four cases their semantic (factual memory), episodic memory (recollection of events) and flash bulb memory (within episodic memory with visual quality) seemed to be not too bad although the narratives presented obviously were only part of a larger pool of experiences, some forgotten altogether, others waiting to be awoken and others perhaps not. I remember talking to my own former colleagues from Kosovo and not remembering events when talking or seeing

photos that also included me. I will reflect further on the inter-subjectivity of the interviews in the following part.

### Some steps towards critical subjectivity

In line with academic discourse not being neutral, I will endeavour into what peacekeeping researchers Paul Higate and Ailsa Cameron argue in favour of, the writing of the researcher into the project by auto-ethnography aimed at achieving a critical subjectivity as often done in anthropology, sociology and feminist scholarship.<sup>25</sup>

I am both a Danish/western white male researcher and a former soldier with a deployment 'under the belt', which gives me advantages as well as disadvantages in relation to my research as well as the interviews.

Being Danish (albeit with a mother born in another country) and raised in a western oriented setting has obviously shaped and still shapes my way of understanding and interacting with the world. Several prisms or taken for granted truths have had and have to be remedied so as to bring less baggage and more openness to the interviews. These concern themselves with the ideas on the organisation of private life and sense of self (as in a binary opposition to the collective) as well as economic, social and political life, agriculture and 'development', science and time to mention just some. Although I have tried to inform myself by studying these dimensions of the places I will go to do interviews one cannot entirely escape one's own epistemological and ontological background and arrive as completely tuned in or with a tabula rasa. This entails that the interviews, when speaking to soldiers of non-western nations Palestinians, Bedouin, Israelis, Egyptian Greek as well as Turkish Cypriots will be cross-cultural with the issues of being an outsider and perhaps also perceived as provider of assistance of sorts as well as dealing with different language structures (direct vs. indirect), senses of privacy, interview and conversation habits, perceptions of self and so on.

While my Danish and western heritage forms the general backdrop for me, my encounter with the dehumanising industrialised military regime of the nation state seems to play a larger role why I have done resorted to a Geertzian 'thick description'.

Having been in and performed a unit in the Danish army for 18 months with 6 months thereof in the KFOR mission of NATO in Kosovo in 2003 has on the one hand also obviously not only informed my views with regard to military matters and especially peacekeeping, but also physically as well as mentally conditioned me. I was trained to acquire what John Hockey, a military sociologist has called 'infantry body' through the ordering of time, space and body into a particular of regime. One is broken down as civilian individual and reconstructed as a function in a collective within a state apparatus designed to control and distribute violence as a 'solution' to a larger given problem.<sup>26</sup>

After my draft training, pre-mission training and during my deployment I lived not in Kosovo while deployed 'there', but rather in a hyper masculine 'mini-Denmark'. I 'worked' in Kosovo every day crossing the 'border' at the camp gate with my uniform and weapon as my passport. Feeling what I today will call the different regimes, technologies and rationales of the different

---

25 Higate, Paul and Cameron, Ailsa: "Reflexivity and Researching the Military", *Armed Forces* no. 2 2006, pp. 220-221

26 Hockey, John: "Head Down, Bergen On, Mind in Neutral: The Infantry Body", *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* no. 1, 2002, pp. 148-171

spaces, it seemed not only like borderland I was crossing, but two different worlds. The influence of the dehumanising industrialised military regime of the nation state on my mind can be understood by two examples.

I walked a few of Danish-French joint patrol in the city of Mitrovica with soldiers from a mountain unit from the Pyrenees with some of my squad members, and also some from the parachute regiment from the Foreign Legion. The soldiers from the latter were beyond anything still within the large realm of 'normal' humanity I noticed back then. They were punched in the face with fists by their officers when reprimanded rather than 'just exposed to verbal abuse' and displayed only an interest in wanting to 'get some action' or going back to their quarters to 'polish off some beer'. Some of them were with their various backgrounds very keen on telling me of their various mission experiences and how many lives they had taken. On one of these patrols I was only seconds away from ending the life of the commanding Foreign Legion Corporal or Sergeant. He had informed or rather bragged to me of his Serb background and how he had left Bosnia during the war for 'something he had done' and then entered the legion. Patrolling the area close to the stadium in the southern part of Mitrovica which was and still is dominated by Albanians, he started to point his rifle at young Albanian kids then followed by some hissing in Serbian. Beyond the taunting of his muzzle, I presumed they understood Serbian as most of them left immediately. His behaviour soon came to the extent at which I nearly blacked out of sheer anger. My hand was on my pistol holster and my fingers fiddling with the button, my mind playing the sequence of him dropping lifeless to the ground. But I never opened the holster. Today I am glad for my own sake that I didn't take his life as I had imagined doing. Conflict management was either escalation or nothing. Although there are few valves in the (Danish) military command system, action should obviously have been initiated on my behalf. But I did nothing. I only handed over my pistol to my second in command upon our return to camp with the explanation that it was better for him to have instead of his rifle when we conducted car-searches. Since then I have realized that having decided to take the life of another human being, although not going through with it, brings things to mind in terms of the question of not only who but also what I had become and am today as well as an awareness of the fragility of the human psyche. I was part of a system that I let influence my ability to think and act accordingly; my only reaction was that of escalating violence, reinforcing the structural violence that in many ways armies represent although they might seek to be legitimized through peacekeeping, emergency relief, assistance with natural disasters etc.

Another example of the influence of this regime on my mind was what I did on a weekend away from Kosovo in Sofia, Bulgaria. Although I was to some extent dehumanised or desensitised by the military world I had (chosen to) become part of, I want to emphasize that the decision to take away the dignity of a young woman (who presented herself as 'Daisy') by abusing her and her unfortunate fate of being caught up the system of trafficking, prostitution and actual slavery was beyond any doubt was my own. Other troops chose to do what I did, others 'got their needs fulfilled' in the strip clubs and others because they didn't want to or were scared of the repercussions. There were no repercussions as 'it' took place outside of the 'mission area'... I was forced to eventually face myself and I did not like what I saw. It requires so much less than we think to let go of our self-control and how it, once given or taken away, is even harder to regain. I have thought a lot of this, but even more on 'Daisy' however. My choices and consequences of it and what country, city, town or village she really came from, her real name, if her family knew where she really was, what she was and is doing if she is even still alive today,

are reoccurring thoughts. She remains a young woman in Bulgaria with no name or history representing a life I took part in destroying.

To sum up, my experiences and actions, despite their disturbing character, combined with my training as a historian gives me some advantages with regard to a deeper understanding of military regimes, have sensitised me to the fact that there are differences between national as well as military and masculinity cultures of the various troop contributing countries and accordingly not only differing mental geographies of the 'mission area', but also that deeper historical ties with local groups also plays into the equation of how military contingents well as individual soldiers act.

In relation to the interviews and inter-subjectivity, sharing an in part similar cultural background as Danes as well for the interviewees to know of my background seems to have made a difference although in different ways. In the case of the active officer I got the feeling it was initially more about feeling at ease in the university setting (where he nonetheless suggested we meet) while still in uniform. Once he was 'warm' and felt satisfied with the context he seemed to warm to my bread crumb sharing of my experiences as we more got into personal stories. By the end he nonetheless needed to reiterate his demand for anonymity. For the two interviewees who are now retired, one from his own transport company and the other from teaching in a high school, it seems to have been important with the tacit understanding of having been in the uniform rather than an issue of needing a trustful atmosphere. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that both have had few people to share their stories with and would like to meet again. For the last, working as doctor with occasional life and death situation, it was of little importance in any respect.

Through my experiences and later reflections, later personal travelling activities and reading academic research, I have also become more sensitive to the different manifestations of poverty, violence and loss. It has most certainly also led me on a path where I have begun to question and examine different experiences in relation to the western paradigm of political, economic and military organisation as the one size fits all and its ties to not only western centric thinking through the nation state but also imperialism and colonialism. How this work with locals is for the moment very theoretical and difficult to offer sound reflections on.

As pointed out in interview it takes training and studying to become better.<sup>27</sup> I do feel that I have a learning curve of sorts, but so far I have not yet had the time to sit down and with proper time allocated to lose myself in the interviews for deeper analysis, something I would like to do for reflections for the writing as well as the coming interviews.

---

27 Alistair Thomson interviewed by Miroslav Vanek, Prague 2010